

Matthias de l'Obel (1538 – 1616)

Matthias de l'Obel (also known as Mathias de Lobel, Lobel or Lobelius) was born in 1538 in Lille, then part of Belgium. His father was a lawyer, and Matthias grew up in Flanders. He studied medicine in northern Italy at Padua in 1562, Verona in 1563, and at the University of Montpellier, France, until 1566. When his friend, the celebrated physician and botanist Guillaume Rondelet died in 1566, l'Obel received his notes and manuscripts. After his graduation, l'Obel, by then an ardent botanist, collected plants and built up an intimate knowledge of the flora of southern France. He also travelled with fellow student Pierre Pena, botanising in Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Britain.



Lobelia angulata

Lobelia is a genus of nearly 400 species of annual and perennial herbs, shrubs and subshrubs of tropical to temperate regions, especially America. Twelve species are recognised in New Zealand. *Lobelia angulata* ('angled') is a highly variable creeping and rooting herb often forming dense patches of slender interlaced stems and usually thick, rounded, shallowly-toothed leaves, often with purplish undersides. The white flowers vary in size from 7–20 mm long, and appear for several months over summer. The slender flower stalks elongate as the shining purplish-red berries ripen. Pānakenake is common on well-lit, permanently moist sites in lowland to sub-alpine regions throughout New Zealand. It was among 250 species collected by Banks and Solander in the East Cape area on 20 October 1769.

L'Obel settled temporarily in London, where his first major work *Stirpium Adversaria Nova* (London 1570–71) was published under joint authorship with Pena. In it, he pioneered a system of classification based mainly on leaf shape rather than medical usage, starting with the grasses and other narrow-leaved plants, and continuing with various other groups. Returning to the Low Countries in 1571, he practised medicine in Antwerp and Delft, and produced an enlarged version of his earlier work as *Plantarum seu Stirpium Historia* (1576), describing 1500 species and the localities from which they were collected. It was also translated into a Flemish *Kruydtboeck* (herbal book). Published by the famous printer Christophe Plantin, who had built up a huge number of woodcut images, its 1471 illustrations were reprinted in a separate volume, *Plantarium seu Stirpium Icones* (1581), similarly grouped according to l'Obel's system. The woodcuts were also used to illustrate the works of other botanists.

L'Obel was physician to William the Silent of the Netherlands from about 1579 until the latter's assassination in 1584. Towards the last years of the 16th century, during political turmoil in the Low Countries, he returned to England where he practised as a physician and superintended the physic garden at Hackney, London, owned by Lord Edward Zouche (or Zouch). He accompanied Lord Zouche on his ambassadorial visit to the Court of Denmark in 1592, and through Zouche's influence was appointed *botanicus regius* to King James I in 1606. He spent his last few years at the Highgate residence of a married daughter, and was preparing a further compilation at the time of his death, at the age of 76, on 3 March 1616.

His manuscript material was acquired by John Parkinson, the last of the great English herbalists, who used some of it in his *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640) and was later accused of plagiarism; his illustrations were again used in England for two editions of Gerard's herbal, edited by Johnson (1633 and 1636). Like his Flemish countrymen and fellow botanists Rembert Dodoens and Charles de l'Écluse, Matthias de l'Obel has been immortalised with a genus named in his honour. The French Franciscan monk and naturalist Charles Plumier (1656–1704), who botanised extensively in Central and South America, named one of his plants *Lobelia*, and Linnaeus retained the name in 1753.